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DG HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

DG COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS, CONTENT AND TECHNOLOGY

eHealth-units

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COVER NOTE

5.1 Contact tracing apps and EFGS State of play / effectiveness

1. Issue at stake

Contact tracing and warning applications (apps) can help break the chain of coronavirus infections and save lives by complementing manual tracing and subsequently help reduce the spread of the virus. The eHealth Network and the Commission are working to ensure the interoperability of such applications across Europe. Based on the work done by the eHealth Network in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Member States agreed on technical specifications for applications using a decentralised architecture. The Commission and Member States are now working on the deployment of the agreed solution.

2. Summary

The coronavirus does not stop at borders, and therefore the Commission and Member States are working to ensure that these apps can help break cross-border infection chains by augmenting the information available to manual contact tracing systems, as well as their reach.

In April, Member States in the eHealth Network, supported by the Commission, adopted an EU toolbox on contact tracing apps in the EU's fight against COVID-19 setting out the foundations of a common pan-European approach to contact tracing and warning apps. The eHealth Network adopted the interoperability guidelines in May 2020, detailing the interoperability needs at different stages of the digital contact tracing flow.

Building on the previous work, the eHealth Network adopted in June 2020 the interoperability specifications, which set out the architecture for a European Federation Gateway Service (EFGS) that would allow the exchange of contact tracing keys between the Member States. This will mean that citizens traveling within the countries that have joined the EFGS will only need to install one app. The modalities for processing personal data in the EFGS were adopted in July with the amendment of the Implementing Decision on the eHealth Network. The development and deployment of the EFGS was completed by 28 September. After this, Member States will be able to start connecting to the system, in waves.

The first wave joined the EFGS around mid-October, with Germany, Ireland, and Italy. The rest of the Member States in the piloting community are expected to join by end of November. There are other Member States, which are not part of the piloting community, but are developing an application, and are expected to join gradually from November onwards. The objective is to ensure interoperability among all EU/EEA countries through the EFGS and, in that, the eHealth Network and the Commission continue to support France and other countries, which do not have yet an app that is compatible with the EFGS.

As more and national contact tracing and warning apps are rolled out, it is necessary to focus on the effectiveness of these applications. The eHealth Network, supported by the Commission and the ECDC, and with input from the WHO, has started to work on the monitoring of their effectiveness. This is a necessary exercise for transparency and reflection on the work done, and also to demonstrate the usefulness of these systems. Therefore, it is important to ensure that EU citizens can fully trust such apps and can download and use them without concerns. The more people use the apps, the likelier the positive effect on combating the virus. On this basis, the cooperation between Member States has also extended now to communication activities.

3. Format of procedure in the meeting

For information.

The Member States will be invited to provide their input, to share lessons learned and to identify possible follow-up actions from the eHealth Network that may lead to a better preparedness for future crises.